

LESSONS IN

RECONCILIATION

What We Heard in Thunder Bay

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Canadian
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A great deal has been said recently about reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Businesses and Indigenous peoples will not wait and do not need to be led by government in moving forward with reconciliation and the actions that make it meaningful. In many instances, they have long been living reconciliation day-to-day, providing lessons from which government—and all of us—can learn.

Despite repeated requests of the federal government to be part of the reconciliation discussion, business has been by-and-large excluded. This unfortunate reality is why the Canadian Chamber of Commerce seeks to demonstrate to the federal government that business and Indigenous peoples are often way ahead in reconciliation. Reconciliation is frequently accomplished by straightforward business decisions and respectful actions, not necessarily grandiose strategies that are perceived as tokenism.

Based on the perspectives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous business and community leaders shared at three roundtables in Western, Central and Atlantic Canada, we are highlighting productive relationships between businesses and Indigenous peoples and the lessons in reconciliation they offer.

On June 19, 2019, we sat down with business, post-secondary education, community economic development and Indigenous leaders in Thunder Bay to hear what they had to say regarding reconciliation, what it means to them, their communities and their businesses.

Reconciliation is multi-directional journey

First Nations entered into treaties with the Crown based on the Two Row Wampum. When joining these treaties, they believed they were entering into a partnership as equals based on peace, friendship and trust “as long as the grass is green, the rivers flow downhill and as long as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west.” Relationships between Indigenous peoples and the Crown did not unfold this way, and this has often been the case with business as well.



In what is now Canada, Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples once enjoyed strong nation-to-nation social, military and commercial alliances with European colonists. Had it not been for the co-operation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, for example during the War of 1812, Canada might not exist. These alliances occurred before the *Indian Act*, residential schools and a spate of policies and programs aimed at assimilating Indigenous peoples.

“Reconciliation is a complicated exercise. It is a relationship and therefore, multi-directional,” said one Indigenous leader. “Moving forward is everyone’s responsibility.”

The sentiment of many around the table is that traditional attitudes of government have done little to address the difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. “It takes government forever to resolve issues. Perhaps their hope is that the issues will go away,” said one businessperson.

However, the glass is filling up

One businessperson with experience in the forestry sector has seen considerable progress over the last few decades. “It’s not enough, but there is progress and the business community is driving it,” he said. “For example, First Nations are taking over forest management. Companies would not have thought of that 30 to 40 years ago. However, businesses in the sector looked at where their workforce was and started to build capacity in Indigenous communities. Today, contractors, logging companies and suppliers that would have been non-Indigenous in the past are Indigenous-owned today. Could we do

better? Absolutely, but the glass is filling up. We can argue about how fast it is filling, but I am confident we are making progress. Impact Benefit Agreements that were just pieces of paper a couple of decades ago are now work plans for Indigenous peoples to build capacity and businesses to grow," he added.

Economic development in Thunder Bay is progressing in part due to partnerships with First Nations. For example, the Thunder Bay Economic Development Commission collaborated with the Fort William First Nation on a development plan for waterfront land expropriated from the First Nation by the Crown in 1906 for railroads and grain elevators that was returned in the early 2000s. "The economy of Northwestern Ontario depends upon respectful, positive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and businesses," said one participant. "The sooner everybody realizes that, the sooner everyone will be moving down that path."



If everyone does a little, a lot will get done

One Thunder Bay radio station believes private, mainstream media has not been successful in telling Indigenous stories. As a result, very few Indigenous peoples are involved in broadcasting and are wary of the medium.

This radio station is committed to addressing this issue and is the first business in Thunder Bay to sign onto the *Indigenous Anti-Racism and Inclusion Accord*.¹

"It is a small step, but we figured we had to start somewhere," said the station manager. "The challenge is how to attract Indigenous peoples into broadcasting. How do we make this industry attractive and bridge the gap with Indigenous peoples? We see it as an opportunity to express our commitment to the public and to connect us with the resources, for example, post-secondary institutions, to accomplish our objective. There is no one easy fix, but if everyone does a little, a lot will get done."

Economic development and capacity building are key to reconciliation

Businesses working with government often find themselves as the champions of Indigenous peoples' capacity. "Government is often very rigid and 'by the book'," said one businessperson. One firm that works with the Government of Ontario on infrastructure projects was struck by set asides for Indigenous peoples and communities being limited to the most basic of tasks, such as tree clearing on road projects. Knowing many Indigenous communities have the capacity to do much more, this company started pushing back with the provincial government by asking that Indigenous set asides be offered for functions higher on the value chain, such as surveying and contract administration. "In the last three years, we have seen government RFPs for Indigenous set asides reflect this as well as obliging contractors to engage Indigenous businesses," said the firm's chief executive officer. "The government has made baby steps, and we are making progress. As a business doing work in Northern Ontario, we feel we have a moral and ethical obligation to engage and work with Indigenous peoples and business."

¹ Initiated in 2018 by First Nations communities, The City of Thunder Bay and other public sector employers in the region, the Accord lets those who sign onto it chart their own paths to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and inclusive workplaces by: 1. Addressing racism against Indigenous and racialized persons by setting short- and long-term goals to meet the calls to action or recommendations; 2. Supporting an ongoing process of truth and reconciliation throughout their organization and in the community by developing and maintaining respectful relations with Indigenous governments, organizations and individuals; 3. Reporting on goals annually. (Source: www.thunderbay.ca, accessed July 9, 2019) The Thunder Bay Chamber of Commerce is encouraging its members to sign onto the Accord and has dedicated a [sign-up page](#) on its website to make easy for them to do so.

“Unless Indigenous peoples have champions in business, their capacity is regularly overlooked,” said another businessperson. “Often government contracts are too large for Indigenous companies to bid for on their own, and they frequently rely on larger companies sub-contracting to them to get a piece of the government procurement pie. Both government and private companies that are suppliers need to set goals for doing business with Indigenous enterprises and measure their success in doing so.”

Blending Indigenous knowledge and beliefs with Western science



The Nuclear Waste Management Organization (NWMO) has the mandate under the *Nuclear Fuel Waste Act* (2002) to find one location to bury all of Canada's used nuclear fuel. This waste is currently stored at licensed facilities near reactors in New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba.

The project takes long-term planning to a new level. The decisions made by all stakeholders today will affect many generations to come.

The NWMO's 150-year project involves not only finding a location geologically suitable for this material but it also requires the buy-in and social license of municipalities and Indigenous communities in the region of the site selected.² This is not surprising given that once a location is selected, construction of the storage facility will take 10 years, transporting the waste to the site will take 40 years and the materials will remain radioactive for up to one million years.

Aware of the enormity of its task and the fear factor associated with nuclear waste, the NWMO immediately started seeking the advice of Indigenous peoples by establishing the Council of Elders and Youth that includes Indigenous peoples from across Canada. The role of the Council is to advise the NWMO on how to engage with Indigenous communities, including how to blend Indigenous knowledge and beliefs with Western science in project planning and execution. The Council has also helped the NWMO develop policies for engaging with Indigenous communities and metrics for measuring its performance.

In June 2018, the NWMO introduced its *Reconciliation Statement*,³ the first step in its implementation of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call-to-Action 92*.⁴

² The NWMO asked for communities throughout Canada to express their interest in having this material stored in their regions. Twenty-two did so. Following an extensive narrowing-down process based on technical and social study and engagement, there are five communities in Ontario still being considered.

³ *In the context of reconciliation, the Nuclear Waste Management Organization (NWMO) recognizes historical wrongs in Canada's past and the need to create a better future by addressing the challenges of today. The NWMO Council of Elders and Youth speaks of this journey as a new era for humanity—a time of reconciliation with First Nation, Métis and Inuit peoples.*

The NWMO is committed to contributing to reconciliation in all its work by co-creating a shared future built on rights, equity and well-being. In addition, the NWMO will establish a Reconciliation Policy with an implementation strategy that will be measured annually and publicly reported to contribute to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action.

⁴ “We call upon the corporate sector in Canada to adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples⁴ as a reconciliation framework and to apply its principles, norms, and standards to corporate policy and core operational activities involving Indigenous peoples and their lands and resources. This would include, but not be limited to, the following:

- i. Commit to meaningful consultation, building respectful relationships, and obtaining the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous peoples before proceeding with economic development projects.
- ii. Ensure that Aboriginal peoples have equitable access to jobs, training, and education opportunities in the corporate sector, and that Aboriginal communities gain long-term sustainable benefits from economic development projects.
- iii. Provide education for management and staff on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations. This will require skills based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism.”

It is the NWMO's view that business can set the stage for reconciliation with practical actions. There are Indigenous members on its advisory council, board of directors and executive team, and approximately 85% of its employees have received Indigenous cultural awareness training.

The NWMO provides funds to Indigenous communities to assist them in learning about their project as well as for community well-being. In one community, the NWMO is funding a Cree language program where elders teach community members the Cree language while also providing schoolchildren with robotic kits to learn about robots. In 2018, the NWMO conducted 45 engagement activities with young people.

Educating those who educate tomorrow's business people

Through reconciliation awareness education, Lakehead University has found that faculty and staff are often shocked at their own ignorance of the history of Indigenous peoples and are grateful for having been educated on the subject. While the program is not mandatory, completing it is a requirement for staff and faculty seeking advancement. The University is also pursuing international learning opportunities for Indigenous students to experience Indigenous cultures in Mexico, Brazil and Australia. The University also hosts Indigenous students from these countries.

Through an outside consultant, Confederation College is undertaking a systemic racism audit of its policies, procedures and practices to determine what needs to be done to ensure its workplace is as inclusive and welcoming as possible for faculty, employees and students.

The College's education strategy is to ensure as many Indigenous students succeed as possible. Employees are required to take its Four Seasons of Reconciliation training program.

What lessons can government take away?

- Explore the social and economic potential of Indigenous peoples, communities and partnerships.
- Recognize that to be successful, you must seek outside assistance from business and Indigenous communities.
- Research and document the capacity of Indigenous communities for project planning as well as developing procurement RFPs and determining Indigenous set asides.
- Acknowledge that you may have an institutional racism issue in your workplaces that is a result of decades-old policies and practices. Audit your workplaces to find out if this is the case and take steps to ensure your workplaces are as welcoming as possible to Indigenous and other under-represented peoples. This could include mandatory training on the histories of Indigenous peoples for those in roles that involve working with Indigenous peoples or issues that affect them.
- "Choose some priorities, set measures for success, get down to work and get them done."



At the end of day, we are all "nish"⁵

In seeking reconciliation, government and business would be wise to keep in mind that all humans have four basic needs:

- To belong.
- To have an identity.
- To have a purpose.
- To have a sense of self.

⁵ "Nish" is a commonly-used term for people used by First Nations in Ontario.



Roundtable Participants

Allison Hynes	Manager, Human Resources/Labour Relations	Confederation College
Andrew Dean	Vice President of Research, Economic Development & Innovation	Lakehead University
Arthur Moore	Advisor, Aboriginal Relations	Nuclear Waste Management Organization
Audrey Gilbeau	Executive Director	Nokiiwin Tribal Council
Betsy Birmingham	Dean, Social Science & Humanities	Lakehead University
Dawn Tees	Job Development Officer	Anishinabek Employment & Training Services
Denise Baxter	Vice-Provost Aboriginal Initiatives	Lakehead University
Doug Murray	CEO	Thunder Bay Community Economic Development Commission
Jack Falkins	Site Engagement Associate	Nuclear Waste Management Organization
James Aldridge	Vice-Provost, International	Lakehead University
Jason Thompson	Owner	Superior Strategies
Ken Boshcoff	Incoming Chair	Thunder Bay Chamber of Commerce
Liana Frenette	CEO	TBT Engineering
Nathan Lawrence	Chair	Thunder Bay Chamber of Commerce
Riley Burton	Dean, School of Business	Confederation College
Rob Frenette	President	TBT Engineering
Scott Pettigrew	Station Manager	Acadia Broadcasting

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